Why Should I Use Communication Volunteers?
when understood, evolves into
How to Make the Best Use of Them?

A good manager is always on the lookout for benefits to his/her agency or program, especially when it is low cost and highly effective.

What follows echo's many years actual experience of those in government who developed and have used such an on-going program with the *right* use of communications volunteers.

Just saying the word 'volunteers' to some managers raises the hair on the back of their neck or causes them to shift in their chair and want to change the subject. Others embrace the situation with open arms. Why the difference? Is it due to past experience, ideas and concepts, or could it be misinformation without realization? To be realistic, let's look at some mental hurdles that may inadvertently arise without conscious awareness.

This applies to volunteers in an on-going program, such as the Auxiliary Communications Service (ACS), Search and Rescue, and others. A second category of volunteers, spontaneous or contingent is a separate subject.

CONCERNS, THOUGHTS AND IDEAS RELATIVE TO USING VOLUNTEERS:

1. I don't want to work with, or coordinate, volunteers:

    a. I don't understand them

    b. My staff feels threatened by them

    c. I don't know why they volunteer to help us

    d. I don't comprehend what motivates them

    e. I or (my staff) don't know how to manage them

2. I don't have space (or equipment) for them

3. I don't have time to prepare work for them

4. I don't have time to train them

5. I don't want to deal with liability issues

6. I don't have time to supervise volunteers

7. I don't need them

8. I had a bad experience with one of them and swore never to get involved with volunteers again

Do these concerns really justify our turning down what may be a valuable asset if we can find a way to overcome our concerns? Although that may not appear possible, if we are willing to at least look at the possibility, that is a start. If it will help, there are others who have already walked this path and found it well worth the stroll.

First, this observation: people (you and I and all others) have reasons why we don't do, or want to do, a certain task, or work, or undertaking, program or venture. Interestingly, however, students of human psychology say that the reasons we give are seldom the real reason. It has sometimes been said that only when repeatedly asked "why" about a topic multiple times in the same situation (and in a non-threatening

situation) do we truly reveal the "real" reason. It's not that we are consciously hiding something, rather it is that we are busy and do not have the time to think through our thoughts and reasons. If that is so, then the following "concerns" (or "reasons") may help us begin a start to a dialogue. For starters, let's consider the expressed concerns 1-8:

1. I don't want to work with, or coordinate volunteers:

Okay, but let's ask this: assuming the case can be made for the use of volunteers, is there someone on your staff who might be able and interested in working with the volunteers in an on-going program?

Alternately, are there other departments or programs in your jurisdiction or agency that already uses volunteers that you might tap into?

Is there an existing community organization that can take on the volunteer coordination of the work to be done if a program may be developed with their use,?

But, you may be thinking, I don't really want to do that. Why should I try to overcome my concerns? Well, here are five possibilities:

a. Your agency may be able to have a service it otherwise could not do.

b. It can augment or enhance what existing staff can provide

c. Services provided by volunteers (under conditions that you control) can represent cost savings

d. Developing a plan to use volunteers can generate goodwill. Not using them can send a negative message to a concerned public that pays your salary.

e. With an on-going volunteer group (such as ACS, or a Search & Rescue unit) you can help emergency needs, and enjoy the results once you get adequate answers to your concerns.

1a: As to not understanding volunteers

a. They are people just like staff, with similar needs for recognition, acceptance, direction and usefulness. Mentally consider them as unpaid professional staff and you can get the same results as from paid staff. Obviously this will depend on managerial abilities - good managers get good results. If weak in this ability delegate it to someone who has that skill to a greater degree.

b. Paid staffers are on the job day-to-day so they automatically know what is happening at work. With an on-going volunteer program also provide constant knowledge and information. It really pays off.

1b: As to being threatened by volunteers:
1. It is a normal trait to feel threatened by anything that we think can adversely affect our job, paycheck, job performance or role in life.
2. Rather than view volunteers as threatening or as a possible competitor we can view them as part-time co-workers whose role can materially enhance ours. The difference is literally in our head - the way WE think about it - our reaction.
3. The roles of staff and volunteers can be designed so they do not overlap
4. Staff can be included in developing a volunteer program which can make a major difference in how staff interacts with a volunteer group
5. Also it helps to assure that the staff clearly understands WHAT the volunteers will be doing and the role of the respective volunteer category.
6. As staff openings develop it is very possible that a future employee may come from a volunteer contact. One who has an interest and strong ability to work full time for the agency as a co-worker, one whom we already know and enjoy working with, so it's a pleasure to bring in such a person over a total stranger.

1c. As to why they volunteer:

They do the work because they enjoy doing it and have an inner sense of personal satisfaction from the doing of a task they have taken on and been asked to do by an agency of their community. This can be most difficult to comprehend by those whose thoughts are focused on their "job", or their "pay" from their employer. Highly capable professionals volunteer where they feel their work is a positive contribution, a sense of making a difference. They will leave a program if management does not provide that opportunity.

1d: As to what motivates them, their motivation varies:

On-going volunteers want to be part of a viable continuing program, trained and ready to be used. They do expect the agency to actually use them. Their motivation is a sense of responsibility to use their skills, talents and interests as unpaid volunteers because they *want* to do it, rather than to be paid to do it. Accomplishment is very important. They can be as dedicated as any paid staff within the line of their specialization. When asked "why" we get varying "reasons" which come back to some inner drive to help without concern for a paycheck.

Their motivation is the internal reward of doing something they consider worthy. For some, there is a reward from working with the communications equipment and/or systems. Some even create and donate specialized equipment. Now and then, there is a motivation for a paid job. For most it has little to do with money, it is not a motivator, but agencies that do not have a budget for the unit can make a serious mistake. While they may buy their uniforms and pay for travel to fires, floods and other assignments, agencies that pay these items are far ahead of those 'can't find money in the budget' which is a proclamation that the program isn't important. Their services are always less costly than paid staff by the very nature of their volunteering. You might hire them if and when you can, but don't assume they will always accept.

1e: As to how to manage on-going program volunteers:

1. Treat them as you do paid staff, within the realm of their specialties. They are motivated by what those with whom they work do in response to their work: if it is good, say so and if it needs to be improved say so, why and how.

2. Above all else, be SURE to include them in all activations and emergency response situations, even potential. They expect this. It is very much a part of their motivation to be actively utilized. Only the degree varies in a unit, some able to be much more active than others.

3. Recognize them and find ways to let them know that.

4. For EMCOMM Units (Emergency Communications units such as the Auxiliary Communications Service, or ACS) there are helpful materials to aid in their creation, development and management. The State of California OES ACS Web site at http://acs.oes.ca.gov is one source. There is also direct telephone help available from the staff of the Governor's Office of Emergency Services Telecommunications Branch.

2. As to not having space or equipment for volunteers

a. Is there work they can take home to do?
b. Is there part-time staff whose workspace they can use?
c. Is there some appropriate field work to assign them?

3. As to not having time to prepare work for them

a. When sorting your own work, what can be delegated?
b. Can a file be created to include projects for volunteers. Think 'outside the box'!
c. Can you delegate this task to a qualified volunteer? A special project you cannot get done?

4. As to not having time to train volunteers

     a. Can you delegate training to a qualified volunteer?
     b. Can you piggyback onto or modify existing staff training?
     c. Can other staff mentor volunteers?
     d. Can they be trained on-the-job?
     e. Is there training available through other sources?
     f. What tasks can be given to volunteers that minimize the training time?

5. As to liability issues

     a. Register them so the Disaster Service Worker Program coverage will apply.
     c. Address liability issues in advance through protocol indoctrination and proper information.
     d. Training is an area where it is possible to reduce the likelihood of possible injuries, so consider that under the training issue, using both experts and volunteers.

6. As to not having time to supervise volunteers:
     a. Can they be given jobs that don't need much supervision?
     b. Can a qualified volunteer supervise other volunteers?
     c. Can you screen them so they require little supervision?

7. "I don't need them":

    In a way this is the most difficult concern for not using volunteers for it isn't really the "reason". Oh maybe if your government hasn't had an emergency in the last 10 years, or it is so rich with funds that it never has a need for further staff time or work then maybe there is one who truly doesn't "need" volunteers. Few Emergency Management Agencies have that luxury. Most truly need help. Only where a government has been lulled into a sleep mode by the lack of a disaster or a real emergency for a decade or so do we see anyone who has no "need" for the use of volunteers in emergency response, at least in their own thinking. It may be that it takes a real emergency to bring home to that agency that it really does "need" community volunteers. More than one EMA manager has been heard to say he/she learned that the hard way.

8. "I had a bad experience with one of them and swore never to get involved with volunteers again"

    This can be difficult for the person often will not openly mention it. However, once they do state it is their reason for not using volunteers it can be with a truly "closed mind" to the subject. I worked with a person that captured in her mind an event so strongly that it was as if it had just happened when it was decades past. She was still experiencing the event and it affected her in ways she could not see. She had had not let it go, and could not move on. She had not yet discovered that life has a way of presenting challenges to see what we will do with them; further, that there is a principal in each challenge that contains a hidden gift that only we who have the experience can discover.

    Applying this to an EMA official with an unsuitable experience with a former volunteer, it is likely that the emotions triggered by the event are still in control. Only by one's own choice can the move beyond that emotion be achieved. Certainly it is extremely hard to think along those lines, much less to do it. But when we move into that space in our thinking, opportunities that *cannot appear until we change our perspective* will, in fact, come to those who can take that step. Over the many years working with government program managers, we've learned that this situation is usually only resolved when the person moves on to another position, unless there are other emotional experiences that involve the person in inner growth.

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